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DE RUEHRB #1394/01 2050855
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 240855Z JUL 06
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4311
INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 4097
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3025
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 5558
RUEHMK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT PRIORITY 3242
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 4302
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS PRIORITY 8983
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA PRIORITY 1929
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1009
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0568

C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 001394

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2011

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SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: GOM DEMARCHE ON FAMILY VISITS

REF: RABAT 1219

Classified By: DCM Wayne J. Bush for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On July 18, Charge attended a meeting convened by MFA Secretary General Omar Hilale to explain the GOM position on the stalled family visit confidence building measures CBMs in the Western Sahara. Hilale stressed the GOM's continued support for the family visits, said the GOM is not responsible for the suspension of the visits, and blamed the current impasse on the Polisario. Hilale stated that Morocco is ready to resume the family visits to and from Dakhla immediately according to November 2005 schedule of flights. He warned absent a return to the initial flight schedule or other tangible progress, the current suspension of family visits risks continuing indefinitely. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) At the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Charge attended a July 18 meeting convened by MFA Secretary General Omar Hilale to explain the GOM position on

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the stalled family visit CBMs in the Western Sahara. Representatives of embassies of other donor countries also attended. Hilale emphasized the GOM's continued strong support for the family visits program, stressed that the GOM is not responsible for the suspension of the visits, and blamed the current impasse on the Polisario. Hilale added that the CBMs are a purely humanitarian issue and should not become politicized. Morocco was the first party to accept, implement, and invest politically in the CBM program and stands committed to the objective of bringing separated communities together, Hilale stated. Recalling the Moroccan delegation's recent trip to UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, Hilale expressed optimism that Morocco's concerns are clearly understood and that the assessment meeting was successful. Neither party has the right to deviate from the CBM agreement, he said, adding that Morocco has never tried to manipulate the times, locations, or selection of participants for the family visits. Hilale claimed that in meetings with UNHCR in Geneva the week of July 10, UNHCR had candidly acknowledged its serious shortcomings in managing this activity.

¶3. (C) Hilale said the current impasse is the result of the unilateral suspension of the CBM program by the Polisario on

June 2. Hilale believed that the Polisario is imposing its will on UNHCR and is trying to politicize the family visits, which is contrary to the humanitarian objective of the program. For example, Hilale said participants from Tindouf have distributed pamphlets and waved Polisario flags while in the Western Sahara. Hilale said it is essential politicization of the family visits stop if the program is to be successful. Hilale argued that, although the CBM plan of action is clear, the Polisario, not Morocco, has chosen to deviate from the approved schedule of flights. Hilale also complained that the Polisario does not allow families to travel together to the territory, impedes family reunification, and interferes with the selection of participants. He accused UNHCR of having insufficient presence in the Tindouf camps and violating the confidentiality of its monitoring activities. "The solution

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to this problem does not rest with Morocco," he said.

¶4. (C) Hilale was optimistic that another long deferred confidence building measure, non-political seminars, could also be arranged successfully once the issue with family visits is resolved. However, he raised two principal concerns for Morocco. First, Hilale said participants from the Western Sahara should be chosen by the GOM, not by UNHCR as previously proposed. Second, Hilale insisted that Moroccans who participate in the seminars should travel using Moroccan passports. Calling this a "matter of sovereignty," Hilale said residents of the Western Sahara can leave freely and therefore should use their Moroccan passports, not UN-issued travel documents. He added that, despite these concerns, it is most important for Morocco to have a dynamic exchange between Sahrawis in Tindouf and the Western Sahara.

¶5. (C) Hilale stated that Morocco is ready to resume the family visits to and from Dakhla immediately according to the schedule of flights agreed upon in November 2005. (NOTE: The departure/arrival location of flights remains a main point of contention between Morocco and the Polisario. Morocco would like flights to resume with Dakhla as the departure location, while the Polisario desires Laayoune to be the departure location. END NOTE.) Hilale stressed the GOM's commitment to the continuation of the CBMs, similar to comments expressed reftel. Hilale added that any changes made by the UNHCR to the November 2005 plan of action should be a result of a transparent discussion among all concerned parties. While thanking all donor representatives for their attendance, Hilale called on donor countries to urge the Polisario to respect the plan of action they agreed to in November 2005. Hilale warned that absent a return to the initial schedule of flights from November 2005 or other tangible progress, the current suspension of family visits risks continuing indefinitely.

¶6. (C) When asked about the possibility of using another means of transport to increase the number of people who benefit from the family visits program, Hilale responded that there is no difficulty with increasing the number of CBM participants from Morocco's perspective, in fact Morocco welcomes the idea. Hilale, however, raised concerns that UNHCR may have trouble coping with an increase in participants given what he sees as a poor UNHCR record managing the program to date.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Embassy would appreciate a read-out from USMISSION Geneva on UNHCR review of the CBM program. Embassy continues to strongly support the CBMs as a means of facilitating direct interaction between Sahrawis in the territory and those in the Tindouf camps. END COMMENT.

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